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Closing the Achievement Gap

Ayeola Fortune,
Guest Editor

This issue of *Gaining Ground* is the second of a two-part series dedicated to a discussion of the achievement gap and improving the educational attainment of African American students. In this issue, Cynthia Reeves writes about the Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project, established by Robert Moses in 1992, to focus on improving mathematical achievement of minority students in the South (see last month's issue for a review of Robert Moses' book *Radical Equations*). Jana Martella's article summarizes the findings from three major longitudinal studies regarding the positive impact of high quality preschool programs on African American children. Finally, Gitanjali Pande synthesizes remarks made by Jay Heubert, Columbia University Teachers College, during a teleconference presentation.

The Algebra Project Improving Educational Outcomes for African American Students in the Rural South

Cynthia Reeves

According to the U.S. Census 2000, 36.4 million African Americans live in the United States. Fifty-four percent of those live in the southern states known as the Black Belt: Texas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Louisiana, Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee (McKinnon, 2001). Moreover, nearly all of rural African Americans, about 91 percent, live in the South.

The Black Belt is characterized by high poverty rates and low levels of educational attainment. In 1998, the poverty rate for children in the rural south was 27 percent, compared with 17 percent for rural children in the rest of the U.S. (Rogers, 2001). Among black children in the rural south, poverty rates are much higher (41 percent). The South also had the lowest high school graduation rates of any region, 79 percent compared to 85 percent in the Midwest in 1998. For rural blacks, the numbers are even lower. In 1999, 41 percent of rural black adults had less than a high school diploma. The South also has the lowest rate of college graduates (20 percent) and only 8 percent of rural blacks have a college degree or more (Beaulieu, Barfield, & Stone, 2001).

The relationship between poverty, educational attainment and achievement has been well documented. However, research demonstrates that student achievement need not be hindered by conditions of poverty. More and more we are seeing examples of high-poverty, high-performing schools (Jerald, 2001). Rural schools face not only the challenge of student poverty but also of limited resources and geographic isolation. Moreover, rural researchers have long voiced concern

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over the imposition of urban models of schooling in rural areas (Khatti, Riley & Kane, 1997). Few education models or programs take into account the community context and the role community factors play in determining students' opportunity to learn.

One program helping African American students in rural high poverty schools to achieve to high levels is the Algebra Project, started in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Robert Moses in 1982 (see last month's issue for a review of his recent book). In 1992, Moses established the Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project to focus on schools in the Mississippi Delta and other poor areas throughout the South. In Mississippi, more than half of the population lives in rural areas and more than one-third of the state's rural students live in poverty. Almost half of all rural students are at-risk minorities and in the Delta, 84 percent of the black population is poor (University of Southern Mississippi, 1999).

Moses argues that "the absence of math literacy in urban and rural communities throughout this country is an issue as urgent as the lack of registered Black voters in Mississippi was in 1961" (Moses, 2001). The shifting of the economy from one based on manufacturing to one based on technology and knowledge requires that students, to be successful, must enter the workforce with a high degree of technical and interpersonal skills. These economic changes impose new requirements on education, including the need for higher mathematicical skills for all students. Moses argues that, in our society, algebra is a gatekeeper to higher education and citizenship, and the ongoing struggle for citizenship and equality is linked to mathematics and science literacy. For students to have access to economic opportunities, they must have higher mathematical skills. The Algebra Project was founded on the belief that if African American students are to be prepared for college mathematics, they must take a college prep sequence of math courses in high school. That means taking a course in algebra by the eighth grade.

Moses and others developed a "transition curriculum" to prepare middle school students for grade 8 algebra. The transition curriculum is based on a process that includes experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application as well as interaction, cooperation, and group communication The underlying belief is that many important concepts of elementary algebra may be accessed through ordinary experiences. The process helps students bridge the transition from real life to mathematical language and operations. Through this process students participate in an event that will generate data that becomes the vehicle for introducing mathematical concepts.

The five steps in the Algebra Project's curriculum process are:

1. *Physical Events:* A trip is the central experience of the curriculum. The trip could be by subway or bus. If no public transportation is available, students can take a walking tour of their community.
2. *Pictorial Representation/Modeling:* Students draw a picture or construct a model of the event.
3. *Intuitive Language/"People Talk":* Students discuss and write about the event in their own language.
4. *Structured Language/"Feature Talk":* Students isolate those features of the experience around which they will build the mathematics. Features may include start, finish, direction, distance, etc. The emphasis is on getting students to develop mathematical models for important features of particular events.
5. *Symbolic Representation:* Students construct symbols to represent their ideas.

Teacher training activities are structured around the five-step process. Teachers learn to work with the five steps and to understand the process as a model for designing instruction. However, the goal for teachers goes beyond curriculum training. The emphasis is on trying to form a group of individuals who are committed to fostering mathematics literacy in their school and community. The focus of the Algebra Project is to empower the community to demand access to literacy for everyone by organizing community participation in educational decision making to press for change and to hold schools accountable to the needs of students and the community. The materials, curriculum, and training are intended to empower students and teachers to take responsibility for their own learning.

Rural researchers have argued that strong community connections and the sense of localism and value of place in rural areas is an asset to education. The Algebra Project draws on these assets through its emphasis on the centrality of families, community context, and experiential and culturally-based learning. While the program was originally developed for an urban context, the flexibility, the emphasis on culturally shared experiences as the basis of curriculum, and the high level of community involvement not only allow but also require local educators to tailor the program to fit the needs of the students and community.

Dave Dennis, Director of the Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project, explained that the greatest challenge for the program is changing the culture around the school—changing the attitudes of the stakeholders about what the student are able to do. While this is an ongoing struggle, Algebra Project schools continue to prove that poor minority students can learn algebra by middle school if educators and parents believe they can and support their efforts (West & Baumann, 2002; Davis, West & Lynch, 1998). For example, St. Helena Elementary School on St. Helena Island, SC, historically had the lowest test scores in Beaufort County

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High Stakes Testing: Challenges and Opportunities For Students at Risk

Gitanjali Pande

This article is based on a teleconference presentation in December, 2001, made by Jay Heubert, from the Teachers College, Columbia University, Columbia Law School. It summarizes the impact of implementing statewide mandatory promotion/graduation tests on student achievement, particularly with respect to African American students.

It has been argued that high-stakes testing is likely to have the greatest impact on minorities, on English-language learners, and on students with disabilities. What is debatable is if graduation and promotion testing will hamper or help these students in the short-term versus the long-term. Proponents of standards-based reform and high-stakes testing argue that these students have more to gain from such testing since they are often victims of lower test standards. Critics, however, fear that it will lead to disproportionate grade retention since teachers often do not have the training to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for minority and special education students to pass the tests. In fact, data shows that even on basic skills graduation testing, minority students fail at higher rates than other students. For example, in the 1970s, when minimum competency tests were common, 20 percent of black students compared with 2 percent of white students – a ten to one discrepancy – initially failed Florida's graduation tests and were denied high school diplomas.

For a variety of reasons, over time failure rates usually decline among all groups. For example, after a few years of the minimum competency tests, black failure rates in Florida were far lower than 20 percent. Texas reports that pass rates of blacks and Latinos roughly doubled between 1994 and 1998, and that the gap in failure rates between blacks, Latinos, and whites narrowed considerably over that time.

What remains unclear is the extent to which improved pass rates on graduation tests actually reflect improved learning and teaching on the part of students and teachers. During the 1980s, improvements reported by many states were unconfirmed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). More recent grade 4 and 8 NAEP scores suggest improvements in math performance — especially among black, Latino and low-income students during 1990-1996— in those states (including Texas and North Carolina) that invested heavily in smaller class sizes, preschool programs, and better resources for teachers (Grissmer et al, 2000). However, it is unclear to what extent such improvements are due to high-stakes graduation testing or due to the specific educational interventions just mentioned.

Some factors other than improved achievement may explain increased pass rates on state tests, such as students' familiarity with the test's format; apparent reduction in high failure rates due to easier state tests or lower cut-off scores; and exclusion of low-achieving students from test-taking, which makes pass rates of those remaining higher even if the achievement of those actually taking the test has not improved. Thus, reported pass rates should be viewed in the context of (a) dropout rates; (b) inclusion of students who pursue a general equivalency diploma; and (c) exemptions of students with disabilities or English-language learners.

Some research shows that large-scale promotion testing has lead to higher rates of grade retention, especially for black students, Latino students and English-language learners. This is significant because the single strongest predictor of dropout rates is grade retention. The rapid increase in promotion testing is likely to create a disproportionate number of minority students with increasing dropout risks by virtue of being retained in grade one or more times. Disparate outcomes often associated with dropout status include sharply reduced earnings, reduced employment prospects and further education, and increased risk of involvement with the criminal justice system.

Whether large-scale promotion testing helps or hurts low achievers depends on whether such tests are used to promote high-quality teaching and education for all children or to penalize students without access to high-quality programs. This is the principal theme echoed by Education Secretary Richard Riley, in his February 22, 2001 "State of American Education" address. He said a "midcourse review" of the standards movement was needed "because there is a gap between what we know we should be doing and what we are doing" (Riley 2001: 6). The American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurements in Education assert that promotion and graduation tests should cover only the "content and skills that students have had an opportunity to learn" (AERA, APA, and NCME, 1999: 146, Standard 13.5).

Unfortunately there are often discrepancies between what high-stakes tests measure and what students have been taught. In addition, promotion or high school diplomas are denied to students who fail state or local tests, regardless of how well the students performed on other measures of achievement, such as course grades. To complicate matters, there is no satisfactory mechanism for ensuring that states and school districts respect even widely accepted norms of a p-

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Investing in Early Education for Black Children Pays Off…. but "Quality Counts"

Jana Martella

Shortly after the nascent identification of the "achievement gap" in the 1950s and '60s (ably described in the guest editorial opening the January 2002 issue of *Gaining Ground*), educators and policymakers alike recognized that the kindergarten year was not too soon to intervene on behalf of the young children at risk of school failure. The Great Society Programs of the 1960s included the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, particularly the Compensatory Education for Disadvantaged Students sections, known as Title I today, which from its earliest inception allowed school districts to target efforts at preschoolers, and the hallmark of federal early childhood education programs, Head Start.

A developing body of research, some of it begun in those early days, indicates high-quality early education does indeed contribute to success in school, as well as in the work place and lives of all students. Interestingly, the three studies that currently form the bulwark of that research were focused on programs that almost exclusively served African American children.

Perhaps the most familiar of the early childhood studies, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project conducted in Ypsilanti, Michigan, examined 127 African American children aged 3 and 4 who were poor and had additional risk factors for school failure. They were divided randomly into a group that received high-quality preschool programming and a comparison group that did not attend preschool. In tracking student outcomes through the elementary and secondary years, those receiving preschool services demonstrated significantly higher academic achievement and high school completion rates compared to their peers in the control group. High/Scope researchers continued to collect data from the Perry Project students and the comparison group into their late 20s. The data showed major differences favoring the preschoolers as adults in terms of social responsibility, as indicated by criminal arrests; earnings and economic status, demonstrated by such indicators as income and welfare enrollments; and commitment to marriage, demonstrated by number and length of marriages.

A similar project begun in the 1970s in North Carolina found comparable results in the cognitive development, academic achievement, and life outcomes of the children receiving early childhood education services. The so-called Abecedarian Study was designed to test the "preventative impact" of early childhood education as a component of comprehensive health and family services and to increase understanding of how early childhood education affects child development.

The Abecedarian interventions were provided from birth to age five in a childcare setting and included the following essential educational components: developmentally appropriate, stimulus-rich environments; activities and curriculum designed to support social, emotional and cognitive development; an emphasis on language development; individualized prescription of all interventions and activities; low child-adult ratios; and well-trained staffing. All the children in the treated and control cohorts were from low-income families and 98 percent were African American.

Measured gains over the control group included improved school performance in reading and math; reduced grade retention; fewer special education placements; and greater levels of high school completion. Interestingly, the study also found benefits to the parents and families of the children treated in the form of improved parental education and employability. Among the other significant findings of the Abecedarian Study were that the highest risk children benefited the most, and those highest risk children receiving services birth to five, who then attended high quality local schools, showed the greatest gains over time.

These final results are echoed in the Chicago Longitudinal Study. This study followed 1,500 children from the poorest urban neighborhoods who were participants in the city's Child-Parent Center Program (CPC) in the 1960s and '70s, tracking the students until age 21. Of the more than 3,000 who comprised the CPC study group and its comparison, 92 percent were African American.

The Chicago Study provides similarly remarkable results to that of the antecedent research, but with a much larger cohort. With school success as the primary target, the CPC program emphasized written and spoken language and numeracy, and the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills in language arts and mathematics through a relatively structured but diverse set of learning experiences. The CPC participants registered higher school achievement throughout their schooling, demonstrated a 41 percent reduction in special education placement and grade retention throughout the school years, and a 29 percent higher rate of high school graduation. Of significance, those participating beyond the CPC early years into the extended program in grades K-3 had higher achievement scores in adolescence.

The latter two studies distinctly demonstrate that extending comprehensive and integrated education interventions into the early elementary

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High-Stakes Testing

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propriate, nondiscriminatory test use.

Given these concerns, some key elements of a sound high-stakes testing policy within the larger context of standards-based reform are (a) to bring actual instruction in line with state standards and curriculum, which requires more teacher training on how to enact the new curriculum, how to identify problems in the curriculum, and how best to address diverse students' learning needs; (b) to use multiple measures of student achievement and readiness in making promotion and graduation decisions; (c) to encourage states to consider that unless use of a test leads to improvement instruction and education opportunities, it is inappropriate, especially since two placements that typically harm students are grade retention and placement in typical low-track classes (NRC, 1999); and (d) a critical need to a focus on early intervention (Grissmer et al, 2000).

All the above issues call for additional research. This research should focus on what interventions work; on how treatments effective in some settings can be implemented widely; and, not least, on how high-stakes testing policies affect student learning and dropout rates, for students generally, and for such important groups as students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities.

In conclusion, the standards movement and high-stakes testing present both opportunities and risks for closing the achievement gap between student groups. Students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities stand to benefit the most if all students receive high quality instruction. If states and school districts are going to use high-stakes testing, then it is critical that such testing be done well. Disregarding these principles is likely to put not just students at risk, but also their teachers and schools.

Council Unveils New Strategic Direction

The Council of Chief State School Officers Board of Directors has unanimously endorsed a new vision for the organization, and Council staff will be reorganized to align with the vision.

The Council's vision, developed by the Board with input from Council members and others, states: "As America's chief state school officers, we envision a system of schooling in each state that ensures high standards of performance for every one of our children and prepares each child to succeed as a productive member of a democratic society." The Board also plans to develop a set of belief statements to accompany the vision.

Council staff created a mission statement to align with the vision. The mission statement is: "CCSSO, through leadership, advocacy, and service, assists chief state school officers and their organizations in achieving the vision of an American education system that enables all children to succeed in school, work, and life."

The vision, mission, and reorganization follow a six-month strategic planning process, initiated when CCSSO Executive Director G. Thomas Houlihan began in his position in July 2001. For the strategic planning process, the Council is applying a high-performance model based on Baldrige criteria and the quality philosophy as a framework for continuous improvement. CCSSO will continue to work within the framework as it moves forward.

"This reorganization will result in a streamlined leadership team that will focus on the mission and vision of the organization," said Houlihan. "We have eliminated a number of positions and added others to help us bring focus and alignment to our mission. I'm excited about the individuals who I believe are poised to help our membership be even more successful in our future."

Organized around leadership, advocacy, and service functions, the Council will be made up of the Executive Office and four divisions: the Division of Leadership and Chief Development; the Division of State Services and Technical Assistance; the Division of Advocacy and Strategic Alliances; and the Division of Internal Support and Operations.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the presenter and do not necessarily reflect those of the Council.

Early Education for Black Children

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years both strengthens the likelihood of positive outcomes for students and sustains those gains over time and into adulthood. The policy implications for African American children at risk of school failure are readily perceived. Interventions that include comprehensive, quality educational and family-support services to economically disadvantaged children result in increased academic achievement, and this benefit accrues to the child, first and foremost, and to society at-large as well. Any strategy to reduce the achievement gap would be well-served by increased investments in quality, comprehensive early childhood education for these children.

In its recent study on early childhood education throughout the 50 states and the District of Columbia, *Education Week* found increasing attention and investment in America's preschoolers. However, the good news cited in "Quality Counts 2002: Building Blocks for Success" was counterposed with a picture of a nation-wide "non-system" of early education and care that is burdened with great variations in both investment and quality.

Access to quality early childhood education programs is in large part a function of income and, by derivation, of ethnicity. The children at highest risk of school failure and in greatest need of the quality programs that prepare them to enter the schoolhouse door ready to succeed are, in fact, the least likely to have access to such services.

Peer Collaboration Meeting Teaches Key Lessons

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Policymaker Partnership (PMP) of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) recently hosted the third peer technical assistance meeting focused on Title I and IDEA collaboration. The meeting's purpose was to enable state teams to recognize shared successes and continuing challenges to effective collaboration. The meeting , held December 11-14, 2001, in Baltimore, MD, involved teams from eight states: Illinois, Louisiana, Wyoming, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Utah, and Washington. State and local administrators, parents, and representatives from OSEP, Compensatory Education programs, and the Inspector General's Office of the U.S. Department of Education shared examples from the field and offered strategies for strengthening Title I and special education collaboration.

Some key lessons emerged from this meeting. First, states learned from their colleagues about promising practices that can lead to successful collaboration. Second, states identified barriers that must be considered, and ways they can be overcome, if collaboration is to become a reality. Third, states developed a deeper understanding of the complexity of collaboration and of the important role of the State Departments of Education in furthering collaboration. Following from this, states recognized the need for technical assistance that brings people together and develops a broader knowledge base and deeper understanding across programs.

A proceedings document for this meeting will be available at the CCSSO website at http://www.ccsso.org/hps/hpspolicymaker.html in March 2002. For additional information regarding this meeting or the Title I and IDEA Collaboration Network, contact Elaine Bonner-Tompkins at elainebt@ccsso.org or 202/336-7035.

Summer Food Service Program

Although it is only February, it is not too early to be thinking about summer. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture is one tool for ensuring that children do not go hungry during the summer months when they are not in school. While nearly 14 million children receive free and reduced-price meals and snacks at school for nine months out of the year, only about 2 million receive the free meals provided by the SFSP during the summer months. SFSP hopes to increase that number.

Organizations that sponsor the SFSP receive payments for serving healthy meals and snacks to children and teenagers, 18 years and younger, at approved sites in low-income areas. Schools, public agencies, and private nonprofit organizations may apply to sponsor the program. Your state education department can tell you where and how to apply. Training is provided in planning, operating, and monitoring a successful food service program.

Access to healthy nutritious meals during the summer is critical if children are to be able to participate in recreational and educational programs. For parents, participation in this program can help to stretch limited resources.

For information on the Summer Food Service Program see the USDA website at http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer/ or contact your state department of education.

The Algebra Project

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(also home to the affluent community of Hilton Head Island). Ninety seven percent of St. Helena's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The student population is 99 percent African American. In 1995, the school implemented the Algebra Project. By 2000-2001, St. Helena had the highest math scores in the county with 80 percent of students scoring at basic or above on the state test. According to Dr. La Verne Davis, principal of St. Helena Elementary School, the close-knit rural environment was a big factor in the success of the program. The community loved the idea of their kids learning algebra and the teachers were willing to work hard to ensure that they did. Dr. Davis explained that the reading and writing involved in the Algebra Project curriculum has also resulted in improved reading scores. In 2000-2001, 80 percent of St. Helena students scored at the basic level or above on the state reading test.

Dennis explained that a primary goal of the program is to get the young people to believe that they can do this work, to understand the importance of education, and to create a demand for high quality education. As students gain confidence, the results are seen beyond students' mathematics test scores. Dennis reported that since the Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum includes a great deal of reading and writing, AP schools have seen improvements in these areas as well. Not only does student confidence spread beyond math to other disciplines, but also to students' lives outside of school to their relationships with the larger community (Dennis, 2002). While the focus of the Algebra Project appears to be to improve math literacy, the project is first a community organizing project. It is about strengthening school and community relationships and empowering the community to demand access to literacy for everyone.

For further information, visit the Algebra Project's website www.algebra.org.

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HIGH POVERTY SCHOOLS Initiative

Upcoming Conferences
Initiative to Improve Achievement in High Poverty Schools
and
State Support Team Initiative

During the week of May 5, 2002, CCSSO will sponsor two conferences in Albuquerque, New Mexico. From May 5 - 8 there will be a meeting of the Initiative to Improve Achievement in High Poverty Schools (HPSI). From May 8 - 10, the first of three meetings of the State Support Team Initiative (SSTI) will be held. The two groups will meet concurrently for part of Wednesday, May 8.

The topic of the HPSI meeting is *Implementing ESEA: States and Districts Sharing Best Practices.* It will focus on the implications of the reauthorized ESEA for state and local education agencies. Information about the meeting, including registration forms, was sent to those who participated in previous HPSI meetings by memorandum dated February 13, 2002. If you did not receive this information and would like a copy, please contact Madeline Morrison at (202) 336-7039 or madelinem@ccsso.org.

As reported previously in *Gaining Ground*, membership in SSTI is for a limited number of teams identified by chief state school officers. Its purpose is to help increase states' capacity to work effectively with districts to improve academic performance in low-performing, Title I schools. More specifically, it will focus on the creation and operation of school support systems, the use of data to examine root instructional issues influencing student achievement, and how instruction can be changed to improve achievement. With regard to the latter, the concentration will be on improving reading instruction in the elementary grades. Information on the SSTI meeting is being sent only to SSTI team members.